

# **2 Creating and implementing open educational resources for the Spanish as a Heritage Language classroom**

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## **Abstract**

The development of language courses designed specifically for Spanish heritage learners has recently gained much attention at all levels of education in the US. Since heritage learners started to acquire the language since childhood at home, their needs are different from those of students in the traditional foreign language classroom. To fulfill these needs, Spanish heritage teachers at all levels are creating programs and materials to serve this student population. The Heritage Spanish web-based community (<https://heritagespanish.coerll.utexas.edu>), hosted by the Center for Open Educational Resources and Language Learning (COERLL), was created as a space for Spanish teachers to collaborate, share, and communicate about the teaching and learning of Spanish as a heritage language (<https://www.coerll.utexas.edu/coerll/about-coerll>). A specific example of the design and implementation of Open Educational Resources (OERs) in a Spanish as a heritage language course is found at Lehman College from the City University of New York (CUNY), which serves a significant student population of Hispanic origin.

**Keywords:** heritage learners, heritage Spanish, open educational resources, web-based community.

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## 1. Context of the project

The importance of heritage language education has been extensively recognized in the US. In this context, the term *heritage language* applies to languages other than English that are considered minority languages. Instruction of Spanish as a Heritage Language (SHL) in the US has grown considerably in the last decades and the number of students of Hispanic descent enrolling in Spanish courses has generated a need to create programs that suit the specific needs of this population. Heritage speakers have learned the language in their childhood at home but once formal education begins, English becomes dominant. Heritage speakers of Spanish typically acquire total or partial proficiency naturalistically rather than through classroom instruction (i.e. Valdés, 2001).

When heritage speakers study the heritage language that they have some proficiency in or a cultural connection to through family, community, or country of origin, in an academic setting, these students are referred to as Heritage Learners (HLs). HLs are distinct from second language learners and have different needs. Second language learners do not possess previous knowledge of the language to be studied, have no oral proficiency, and have a limited vocabulary and command of grammar structures. By contrast, HLs might possess oral proficiency and native knowledge of the local vocabulary and grammar structures, as well as sociolinguistic, cultural, and pragmatic nuances of the language.

Approaches employed by SHL programs are different from those teaching methods used by Spanish as a Second Language (SSL) programs. In SSL courses, teaching assumes a level of competence of zero amongst students, whereas in SHL courses, teaching must account for a measurable level of competence in the language skills of HLs. Therefore, the SHL teacher must move forward by building upon these existing language skills. Similarly, the interests of HLs cannot be satisfied by SSL courses, which focus on developing elementary vocabulary and oral skills, and where the culture taught carries unconnected materials to the HLs' cultural knowledge.

Considering the needs of HLs, there is a lack of readily available commercial resources despite their growing popularity. Heritage Spanish programs remain underserved by commercial textbook publishers. What this means for teachers who teach HLs is that they are left either to adapt the few published materials that do exist to fit their courses and programs, or else to create their own. For this audience, OERs can provide critical materials tailored to these types of learners.

In the past few years, the use of OERs for language learning has been explored and implemented. [Blyth \(2014\)](#) emphasizes the value of OERs by arguing that

“open education emphasizes the use of digital materials that are easily edited and personalized, an anytime/anywhere approach to learning, the integration of knowledge and social networks in order to connect people to ideas, and a belief that knowledge is best understood as a creative process of co-constructed meaning within a community of practice” (p. 662).

The positive impact that OERs can have on language teaching has been shown with languages such as English ([Altunay, 2013](#)) and French ([Blyth, 2012](#)). In this article, we illustrate how OERs can help fill the gap of materials for teaching Spanish as a HL. We first describe COERLL, a repository of OERs created by a community of Heritage Spanish teachers, and then we describe a specific example of OERs being used for a particular population of Spanish HLs at Lehman College, CUNY, where the goal is to apply OERs to promote positive cultural models and develop bilingual literacy skills. By creating and using OERs, teachers at Lehman College seek to support pertinent and current cultural topics that emerge from the students’ local communities and to focus on the linguistic and academic needs of the heritage language learners.

## **2. Intended outcomes**

As was previously mentioned, there is a growing number of Spanish HLs around the country. At all levels of instruction (K-12 and higher education), teachers are

faced with the task of creating courses that target this specific learner population. Given the variety of Spanish speaking countries from which immigrants arrive and the many different varieties of Spanish spoken in the US, the populations of HLs are quite different from one part of the country to another. In addition, the access to the heritage language is different for each student population depending on their family situation and their geographic location. For example, HLs residing in Miami, Florida live in a very different sociolinguistic environment than those living in Des Moines, Iowa, in El Paso, Texas, or in New York City, where the Hispanic populations come from different parts of the Spanish speaking world (Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Mexico, Puerto Rico, etc.). In some of the places where these HLs live, Spanish is heard and used everywhere, whereas in others, HLs only hear Spanish in their homes and with their families.

Given the wide variety of situations faced by SHL student populations around the country, the students' needs for language instruction are different from one school to another. This situation makes it difficult to find language learning materials that teachers can use in their classrooms. As was mentioned earlier, there is a lack of readily available commercial materials for SHL courses, and thus teachers all over the country at all levels of instruction are creating their own materials or adapting existing materials for their own student population's needs. For this reason, the use of OERs is an excellent way to address the situation. Using open source materials, teachers can access resources, modify, and adapt them to their own needs. For example, teachers in Southern California and Southern Florida might use similar materials to teach a particular grammar concept, but they might introduce the concept using relevant readings for each student population, such as the topic of migrant workers in California and the topic of Cuban immigration in Florida.

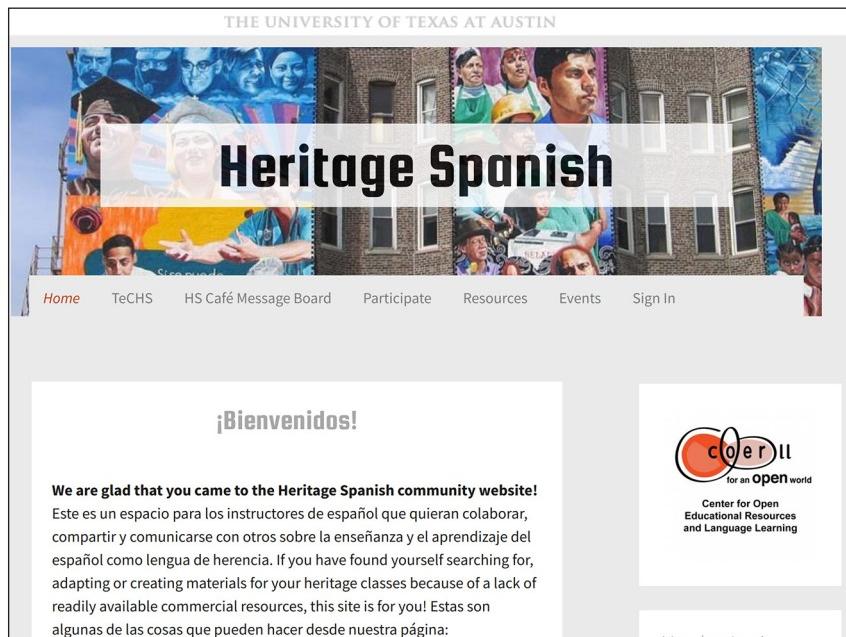
To support the endeavors of SHL teachers at all levels of instruction around the country, the Heritage Spanish website and community was created to serve as a repository and sharing platform for OERs. One example of a resource that has been shared on the Heritage Spanish website are the open source materials that were compiled and created for a SHL course at Lehman College, CUNY. Using open source material from other institutions and some original materials,

we have put together a SHL course that fulfills our students' needs. Given the amount of work it takes to create such a course, it is encouraged for teachers to share their work and help other teachers facing similar needs.

### 3. Nuts and bolts

#### 3.1. The Heritage Spanish website and community

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Heritage Spanish website homepage (<https://heritagespanish.coerll.utexas.edu>)



COERLL is a National Foreign Language Resource Center. There are 16 of these centers around the country, funded by the US Department of Education with the goal of helping the mission of teaching and learning foreign languages. Each of the centers has a different focus. COERLL is hosted by the University

of Texas, Austin, and its focus is to promote the creation of OERs for language learning and instruction, and to disseminate these materials over the internet. COERLL supports projects for K-12 and higher education in many languages such as Arabic, German, French, Chinese, Portuguese, and Spanish.

COERLL has several resources available for learning and teaching Spanish; one of them is the Heritage Spanish website and community (see [Figure 1](#) above).

The Heritage Spanish website serves as a space for teachers to collaborate, share, and communicate with other teachers about the teaching and learning of SHL at any level of instruction. The website serves K-12 teachers as well as higher education teachers, and it contains a forum where teachers can sign up to post announcements and questions or start discussions. They can also sign up to receive a periodic newsletter with useful information for the Heritage Spanish community. There is also a section on the website with current affairs, and another section where you can learn about events that are taking place around the country, such as workshops or conferences that are relevant for the Heritage Spanish field.

Most importantly, the website aims to be a repository of OERs for teachers who are searching for materials for their SHL courses. It contains many resources that might be useful for Heritage Spanish teachers, such as research articles, newspaper articles, classroom activities, lesson plans, syllabi, and many others ([Figure 2](#)).

Through the Heritage Spanish website and community, COERLL aims to promote the creation of OERs and the subsequent sharing of those OERs. Teachers who create lesson plans, activities, or other resources are encouraged to use a Creative Commons license (<https://creativecommons.org>) to share their work openly. The Heritage Spanish website licensing page (<https://heritagespanish.coerll.utexas.edu/licensing-page/>), states the following:

“Here at the [COERLL], we add Creative Commons licenses on all of the materials that we create for teaching and learning. These licenses

indicate that the content is ‘open’ and foster the respectful sharing of ideas. We encourage you to use open materials and to add Creative Commons licenses to materials you create, so that users of your work give you proper credit and understand what rights they do or do not have to reuse, modify, redistribute, or sell your content”.

Figure 2. Screenshot of the Heritage Spanish website resources page (<https://heritagespanish.coerll.utexas.edu/resources/>)

The screenshot shows the 'Resources' tab of the Heritage Spanish website. The main content area contains a paragraph about the resources tab and a bulleted list of categories. To the right is a sidebar with the COERLL logo and a member login form.

**Resources**

The resources tab is a repository for lessons, activities, syllabi, and any other resources you have created, adapted, or found to use in your heritage Spanish classroom. Please contact [info@coerll.utexas.edu](mailto:info@coerll.utexas.edu) if you have a resource to share with the community, and we will post it under one of the following categories:

- Current Affairs
- Classroom Activities
- Textbooks
- Program Profiles
- Articles
- Assessments
- Research and Pedagogy
- Other SHL groups
- Spanish Language Newspapers
- Syllabi
- Other Websites

**COERLL**  
for an Open world  
Center for Open Educational Resources and Language Learning

*Member Login*

Username

Password

Remember Me

**Log In** **Register**

Some of the ways that COERLL promotes the OER movement is by attending relevant conferences and sharing information. Also, several small grants are given each year to selected teachers who propose interesting projects that will produce OER materials to share with the community. In addition, every summer COERLL hosts a workshop about SHL instruction with guest speakers who are experts in the field. Teachers from all levels of education and from all over the country attend the workshop to learn about teaching SHL, and also to learn about the creation and dissemination of OERs. The Heritage Spanish website hosts

a thriving and growing community of Heritage Spanish teachers from around the country, and it will continue to expand as the need for these OERs for SHL instruction continues to grow.

### **3.2. Using, adapting, and creating OERs for a Heritage Spanish course at Lehman College**

As mentioned above, for a long time there has been an absence of available Heritage Spanish commercial textbooks and materials. This absence has left SHL teachers to adapt the limited published materials that do exist for their courses or to create their own, which is time consuming. For this case study, we will focus on a beginner-intermediate SHL course to illustrate the design and implementation of OERs in the classroom. This course is offered at Lehman College, CUNY, located in The Bronx. This institution serves a student population that is 52.5% of Hispanic/Latinx<sup>3</sup> origin. In the design of this course, materials were gathered from many diverse sources that focused on the SHL populations of Dominican and Mexican origin at Lehman College. To be able to provide the volume of necessary and suitable materials, it was imperative to search for, adapt, and create materials for this specific course. It will be clear to any teacher familiar with compiling materials from different books that copyright restrictions present a large problem, and this is why the use of OERs becomes a lifesaver.

These OER materials were formulated for this specific SHL course, designed to fit the topics appropriate to this level in a multi-level curriculum. The goal in using these OER materials was to help the students develop language skills such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing and at the same time, work on their cultural and heritage knowledge. A website using WordPress was created as a reference to find the OER materials for the course ([Figure 3](#)).

To illustrate the process for creating and implementing the materials, we will discuss the use of OER materials during the first three weeks of the semester.

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3. We use the term Latinx to demonstrate a gender inclusive stance with those not included in the gendered uses of Latino or Latina.

Figure 3. Screenshot of the OER website for SHL course (<https://spa114.commons.gc.cuny.edu/>)

The screenshot shows the homepage of the SPA 114 website. At the top, there is a banner featuring a world map with various speech bubbles containing Spanish words like 'hola', 'adios', and 'gracias'. Below the banner, the title 'SPA 114 Spanish for Heritage Speakers 2' is displayed in a large, bold font. To the right of the title, it says 'Course Site for SPA 114'. A navigation menu below the title includes links for Home, Week 1 through Week 13. The main content area is titled 'Elementary Spanish Heritage Speakers 2'. It contains a paragraph of text in Spanish welcoming students to the class and explaining the course's focus on heritage speakers. On the right side of this section, there is a search bar.

### 3.2.1. Materials in Week 1: literacy Skills

In the first week of class, the following OER materials focused on transferring reading skills from English to Spanish. Since English becomes the language of instruction for heritage speakers of Spanish once they enter the US school system, they tend to acquire stronger literacy skills in English than in Spanish. An effective strategy to develop proficiency in Spanish is to transfer skills that the learner already possesses from the dominant language. The following activity applies this type of transfer:

*Activity 1: Transference of reading skills.* The first activity developed by the teacher was an exercise on reading in Spanish using skills students already have a good command of in English, such as finding the meaning of a word through the context in the reading. A video with specific instructions on how to work on the activity was created for this exercise (<https://spa114.commons.gc.cuny.edu/week-1/>). It allowed learners to work actively on reading skills that they usually do not apply when reading in Spanish. To maximize classroom learning and integration

time, the activity was assigned as homework and on the following class section students discussed their findings.

*Activity 2: Maintenance and loss of Spanish.* In the same week, the teacher selected an OER podcast to discuss the importance of learning and maintaining Spanish and to talk and reflect about students' personal connections to Spanish. The teacher created a questionnaire about the podcast to guide the discussion about the topic. Students listened to the podcast at home followed by a discussion in class guided by the questionnaire provided in Week 1 materials ([Figure 4](#)).

Figure 4. Questionnaire to discuss podcast (<https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-0128/ok-dad-why-did-you-kill-spanish-our-family>)

**Escucha el podcast y contesta las siguientes preguntas. Para entregar.**

**Nombre:** \_\_\_\_\_

1. ¿Qué lenguas habla tu madre o padre? ¿Cuál lengua habla o hablan más fluidamente?
2. ¿Cuál fue la primera vez que al papá de Bradley le llamaron “beaner” (*frijolero*)? ¿Qué crees que significa esa palabra?
3. ¿Por qué el papá de Bradley no siente que habla español con fluidez?
4. ¿Qué dice Bradley a su abuelita en el teléfono?
5. ¿Por qué crees que el español dejó de hablarse en la casa de Bradley?
6. ¿Crees que el papá de Bradley mató el español en su casa? ¿Por qué?



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### 3.2.2. Materials in Week 2: cultural heritage

In the second week of the semester, materials selected and created focused on learning and discussing the Latinx population and the history of Spanish in the US and to connect these topics to the students' own heritage. The example material selected is an OER reading with questions created by the teacher to guide the discussion about the reading (<https://spa114.commons.gc.cuny.edu/week-2/>).

### 3.2.3. Exercises in Week 3: grammar

In Week 3, the OER materials were related to grammar topics and were adopted from the repositories in the COERLL Heritage Spanish website. Grammar instruction for SHLs differs from traditional instruction for second language learners. HLs benefit from instruction which focuses on form and understanding of how grammar works from a descriptive perspective (Burgo, 2015). Grammar materials should be authentic and show different Spanish varieties. In this manner, the grammar materials used in the course come from the COERLL Heritage Spanish website, as it is one of the only OER repositories that focuses on a descriptive perspective for SHL (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Screenshot of an OER grammar repository from the COERLL Heritage Spanish website (<http://grammar.spanishintexas.org/verbs/future/>)

**Simple Future or Synthetic Future**

The simple future (or synthetic future) is so-named because it is a one-word tense.

**Form**

The future is conjugated by taking the infinitive and adding the appropriate endings as in the following table:

hablar to speak	
<i>yo hablaré</i>	<i>nosotros/as hablaremos</i>
<i>tú hablarás</i>	
<i>él/ella/usted hablará</i>	<i>ellos/as/ustedes hablarán</i>

 ¿Cómo crees que **será**?  
What do you think it will be like?

The 13 week OER materials website designed for a SHL course at this level, has materials for each week of the semester implemented with the course curriculum. The variety of topics all work towards the same two goals of the class: (1) to develop the HLs' language skills while allowing them to apply those skills in academic and professional settings and (2) to work on the HLs' knowledge about their own cultural and linguistic heritage.

### 3.2.4. *Evaluation of OER materials*

The use of OERs in this course has made it possible to use materials in a transformative way and to create critical awareness for students. The benefits that OERs provided in teaching this course were varied. The teacher had the choice to adapt and customize lesson plans according to the course needs and the students' interests. Also, creating and curating these materials allowed the use of content that was tailored specifically to the students' cultural backgrounds or their particular interests, incorporating actual topics or local language and culture that traditional textbooks do not address.

Students and teachers were able to print, reproduce, and modify the course materials without being confined by copyright restrictions. Moreover, the use of OERs was beneficial to the students from an economic perspective. OERs can be a response on how to balance costs in public education since they can offer considerable savings as an alternative to buying expensive textbooks. Students in this course extensively expressed their appreciation for the reduced economic burden of not having to buy a textbook. They also voiced that OERs allowed them to follow the course easily and gave them flexibility to access the materials from anywhere. Furthermore, students commented that these types of materials kept the course interesting and improved their motivation for learning. They also felt that without a textbook their learning style was more hands on, and they considered OERs one of the best components of the class. Overall, the use of OERs was a great asset in creating a course to serve our students in the teaching of SHL.

## 4. Conclusions

During the past few years, the Heritage Spanish website and community has served many SHL teachers at different levels of education who have searched for resources to use in their classrooms. It has also helped in many ways as support for SHL teacher training endeavors and as support to teachers who have been tasked with creating a Heritage Spanish program in their institution.

This has all been possible through the creation and dissemination of open educational materials. A great example can be found at Lehman College, where open source materials have been extremely useful, as they have been used to create and adapt course materials that are specifically tailored to the needs of their HL population, focusing on promoting positive cultural models and developing language skills.

As the HL population grows throughout the country, it is our hope that with the support of the Heritage Spanish website and community, more institutions will follow their lead. In addition, we hope to inspire SHL teachers in K-12 and higher education institutions to create, use, and adapt more open source materials so that they can best serve the particular needs of their HL student populations and to use these materials in a transformative way to create critical awareness for students.

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